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ABSTRACT

This paper describes how one university professor discovered a gap between her explanation of a class assignment (analyzing a content textbook) and students' comprehension of the assignment. After attending a workshop, she revised all assignments for the content reading course and designed a grading rubric for each assignment. The assignment objectives were stated in terms directly relevant to information presented in class. Assignment procedures were enumerated and clearly stated. Each product required for the assignment was described, and a rubric that delineated each product was attached. To develop the rubric, the professor examined several models from the literature, then listed the criteria for each assignment and determined the quality levels for each part of the assignment. Students were much more comfortable with the revised version and wrote positive comments about the rubric. The professor noted an increase in student understanding of the assignment and learning from the assignment. (SM)

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Reflective Teaching: A Good Practice Even at the University Level

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Reflective Teaching: A Good Practice Even At the University Level

A teacher, at any level, experiences frustration when unacceptable or inferior work is turned in for an assignment. Many teachers find it difficult to admit that they do any less than a stellular job of explaining assignments. Often the teacher places the responsibility for poor quality work upon the students' shoulders, and, admittedly in some instances, the teacher is justified in doing so. However, when many of the students in classes fail to meet the teachers' expectations, it is time for teachers to reflect upon their part in the learning process. Throughout my teaching career, I have tried to be very clear in my teaching and the explanation of the work I expect students to do. Overall, I feel I had been successful in achieving that objective.

After over twenty years in education, I made the transition from public school teaching to the university setting. One of the first classes I taught was a content reading class for secondary education students. For many students this is the only course they take in how to use reading to teach content. I realized these students did not have the necessary prior knowledge for the course, and I thought I had prepared my assignments and lectures to account for this and to provide the necessary background knowledge. I will admit that I had a higher level of expectation that college students would understand assignments better than the middle school students I had previously taught and would require less detail in the explanation of an assignment's requirements.

Imagine my confusion when there seemed to be a gap between the explanation of the first assignment, which was an analysis of a content textbook, and several students' comprehension of that assignment. Of course, I engaged in the usual mutterings of lack of student interest and involvement in assignments; eventually, I had to accept some of the

responsibility for the problem. I explained the assignment again and allowed students to redo it if they chose. This, of course, meant more class time taken to explain the same assignment and more of my time to reread and regrade.

In November, 2001, I attended an Across the University Writing Program sponsored by the university for faculty members. One of the sessions involved revising assignments and designing rubrics or scoring tools to clearly define and convey the instructor's expectations for an assignment. I had used rubrics for reading and writing assignments in my middle school classes but had not thought of the viability of their application in my college reading classes.

A rubric has been defined as a scoring tool that establishes the criteria for an assignment and delineates what is important, what will count. Rubrics can be used as a support for student learning as well as an assessment tool for the teacher (Goodrich, 1995). Liu (1995) lists five reasons to use rubrics:

- Rubrics tell students they must do careful work.
- Rubrics set standards. Students know before they begin the assignment what they have to do to achieve a desired level.
- Rubrics clarify expectations.
- Rubrics help students take responsibility for their own learning.
- Rubrics have meaning for parents and other community members.

Rubrics have the potential to improve student performance since through the rubric teachers can clearly define expectations and how students can meet those expectations (Goodrich, 1997). One student's comment about the teacher's use of rubrics was, "If you get something wrong, your teacher can prove you knew what you were

supposed to do" (Marcus, 1995). Rubrics are best used when shared with students and revised based upon the results from student use and comments about that use (Lui, 1995). When students are given rubrics prior to an assignment and taught to use them for self-evaluation, they become able to identify and correct problems in their own work, and the quality of their products improve over time (Howe, 1997). The fifth reason to use rubrics does not directly apply to college level students since their parents are usually not involved in the daily work of college students as parents of public school students are involved. However, it may have implications for articulation of university professors' expectations to their colleagues or to those in administrative positions.

Teachers, at all levels, benefit from the use of rubrics in several ways. First, the amount of time required to evaluate student work is reduced since the required criteria and quality of the product is clearly defined. In addition, rubrics make the explanation of the assignment easier and clearer for both students and teachers (Goodrich, 1997).

Based upon ideas that Dr. David Russell presented at the Writing Across the Curriculum program, I revised all the assignments for the content reading course and designed a grading rubric for each assignment. The assignment revisions contained several parts. First, assignment objectives were stated in terms that directly related to information presented in the class lecture. Next, the procedure for the assignments was enumerated and clearly stated. Then, each product required for the assignments was described, and a rubric that delineated each product was attached. To develop the rubric, I examined several models found in the literature about rubrics. Then I listed the criteria for each assignment, and determined the quality levels for each part of the assignment.

Students practiced using the rubric, and changes were made according to the results of that practice.

To gauge my success in rewriting the assignments and the rubrics, I asked the content reading class students to compare one of their original assignments, a textbook analysis, to a newly revised version. I asked them to give both positive and negative comments. Out of 34 anonymous responses, 32 students stated that the second assignment description was better than the original one. Two students stated they understood both assignments equally well. Reasons for choosing the revised assignment as the better one were fairly uniform. Students indicated the directions were clear, precise and specifically stated what to do. Based on their reasons, it seemed as though students did not have to infer the expectations I had for successful completion of the assignment. Since the directions were given in sequential order, the students could follow them easily. In addition, the students said that the revised assignment examples helped tremendously. The students wrote extremely positive comments about the rubric. For most students, the rubric served as a checklist. They could see the individual parts of the assignment and check each part they had completed. In addition, the rubric assigned specific points for each section, so the students were able to tell which I considered the most important and spend more time on that particular part. "Using the rubric as a checklist helped me think better," one student stated. Another student commented, " I have no questions about the assignment after reading the revised version." Most of the comments were similar to these. The directions for the assignment and the first rubric developed are presented first.

Rubric for Textbook Analysis
Objectives of project:

1. To give students practice in assessing textbook readability

2. To find the readability, or reading difficulty, of a textbook currently used in the student's content area

3. To examine those features of a textbook that are critical to the ease/difficulty of student use of that textbook as described on a checklist

Research: In class, practice using various formulas—the Fry and the SMOG, and a shortened readability formula from an outside text, "Evaluating Shorter Passages."

Procedure:

1. Select a content area textbook that is currently being used. The best choice is one used in your mentor classroom. Find the teacher's manual for the text since some areas on the Readability Checklist pertain to it.

2. Choose the Fry or SMOG formulas practiced in class.

3. Follow the directions for administering the formula and find the readability of the textbook you have chosen. Report your findings in the format presented below.

4. Complete the checklist for the textbook.

5. In a 2-3 page paper discuss each of the major categories listed on the checklist as they pertain to the book. Both strengths and weaknesses should be described, and specific textbook examples should be cited for each discussion point. Under

each major category, choose two of the specific criteria to comment upon and present one specific example from the text to support each specific criteria.

For example: A. "Understandability" is a major category. It reads, "Are the assumptions about students' vocabulary knowledge appropriate?" Comments about this criterion might be: "The textbook authors do not provide definitions for important vocabulary introduced in the text. On page 213, a new vocabulary word is introduced to the students. No definition is provided for the word, but it is a word that most students in ninth grade would have difficulty pronouncing and defining. The textbook authors have done this several times in the passages I have examined, and I believe this is a weakness in the textbook."

One paragraph should be devoted to the findings from the readability formulas and the implications of that readability level for students. For example: If the text's readability is 10th grade, and the majority of students in the class is reading at 9th grade level, what are the implications for using that text in that class?

The concluding paragraph should discuss the overall advantages and disadvantages of using the textbook you examined and your recommendation as to whether or not the book should be used in the classroom.

6. At the top of your paper, give the bibliographic information in this format:

Author's last name, first initial. (copyright date). Title of book. City of publication: Publishing Company. Grade level of classroom

First Rubric for Paper

_____ Introduction-Give rational for readability check of the book. (10)

Body of paper

_____ Paragraph-findings about understandability (5)

_____ Paragraph-findings about learnability (5)

_____ Paragraph-findings about reinforcement (5)

_____ Paragraph-findings about motivation (5)

_____ Paragraph-findings from use of readability formula

_____ Examples specific to text have been given for each category on the Readability Checklist (25)

5 4 3 2 1 0

_____ Conclusion-summation of findings-Strengths and weaknesses discussed (10)

_____ Statements in essay reflect scoring on checklist (20)

_____ Proper use of punctuation, grammar, sentence structure (5)

5 4 3 2 1

_____ Readability Checklist attached (5)

_____ Bibliographic information present and in correct format (5)

After a semester of using the first rubric, I developed a second rubric. The decision to develop a second rubric was based upon student performance and my use of the rubric for scoring. There were no student complaints about the first rubric, but I found myself writing notes to explain why I had not given full credit in each category. This was time consuming and defeated one of the purposes for which I had developed the rubric: the reduction of grading time. In addition, I discovered some students received more credit than was warranted; although they did fulfill the basic requirements given in the rubric, their work was not excellent. The first rubric provided no way to distinguish between average work and exemplary work. The second rubric is included here.

Revision of Rubric

Introduction (10 pts.)	10 pts. Introductory sentence (s), two rationale for analysis	7-9 pts. No introductory sentence (s), two rationale for analysis	4-6 pts. No introductory sentence (s), one rationale for analysis	1-3 pts. Introductory sentence (s) No rationale given
1st paragraph "Understandability" (10 pts.)	10 pts. Two criteria stated & explained, example given for each	7-9 pts. Two criteria stated & explained, one example given for one criterion	4-6 pts. One criterion stated & explained, one example given for criterion	1-3 pts. Two criteria stated, no explanations or examples given
2nd paragraph "Learnability" (10 pts.)	10 pts. Two criteria stated & explained, example given for each	7-9 pts. Two criteria stated & explained, one example given for one criterion	4-6 pts. One criterion stated & explained, one example given for criterion	1-3 pts. Two criteria stated, no explanations or examples given
3rd paragraph "Reinforcement" (10 pts.)	10 pts. Two criteria stated & explained, example given for each	7-9 pts. Two criteria stated & explained, one example given for one criterion	4-6 pts. One criterion stated & explained, one example given for criterion	1-3 pts. Two criteria stated, no explanations or examples given
4th paragraph "Motivation" (10 pts.)	10 pts. Two criteria stated & explained, example given for each	7-9 pts. Two criteria stated & explained, one example given for one criterion	4-6 pts. One criterion stated & explained, one example given for criterion	1-3 pts. Two criteria stated, no explanations or examples given
5th paragraph Findings and Implications from Readability Formula (10 pts.)	10 pts. Specific grade level from formula given, proper terms used to describe results, correct implications from results	7-9 pts. Specific grade level from formula given, some proper terms used to describe results, correct implications from results	4-6 pts. Specific grade level from formula given, proper terms not used, incorrect implications	1-3 pts. Paragraph there, but specific grade level not given, does not use proper terms, incorrect implications

Proper use of punctuation, grammar, sentence structure, spelling (10 pts.)	10 pts. Essay is well-written with 5-7 errors	7-9 pts. Essay is well-written with 8-12 errors	4-6 pts. Essay is poorly written with 8-12 errors	1-3 pts. Essay is poorly written with more than 12 errors
Bibliography information (10 pts.)	10 pts. Information is correctly cited with no punctuation errors	7-9 pts. Information is correctly cited with few punctuation errors	4-6 pts. Some of the information is out of order but has few punctuation errors	1-3 pts. Significant problems with order of information and several punctuation errors

As a result of my experience at the retreat and in my classes, I now pay very close attention to each assignment in order to ensure that the criteria in the assignment explanation and on the rubric fully convey my expectations. An added bonus is the reduced amount of time spent grading each student's assignment. Because the rubric clearly defines for me what should be in each part of the assignment, I can quickly read through the paper to see if the criteria have been met. I am more pleased with the products I receive from the students and experience a greater satisfaction with my performance as a teacher. Most importantly, there is an increase in student understanding of the assignment and learning from the assignment.

Goodrich, H. (1997). Understanding rubrics. *Educational Leadership*, 54, 14-17.

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Marcus, J. (1995). Data on the impact of alternate assessment on students. Unpublished manuscript. The Education Cooperative, Wellesley, MA.

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